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THE BIBLICAL WORLD

VOLUME XXXII

AUGUST, 1908

NUMBER 2

Editorial

THE RELIGIOUS VALUE OF THE SCIENTIFIC SPIRIT

The rise of the modern scientific spirit in Europe and America was viewed with alarm and met with antagonism by the representatives of religion. One does not need to be very far advanced in life to be able to remember the fulminations of pulpit and religious press against what was then known as Darwinism. The more recent denunciations of evolution are familiar to all. Indeed a large part of the Christian church still views the doctrines and spirit of modern science with suspicion if not alarm. Not only does the Pope declare by encyclical that there is no place in the church for those who are not willing to look to her as their supreme guide in all matters on which she speaks, but many a Protestant draws for himself and for others a definite line at which investigation must cease and authority take the place of evidence.

Nevertheless the scientific spirit has gone on its victorious way. From biology to history, from history to theology and religion it has moved, and promises today to become the dominant spirit of the intellectual life of the Occident. Not only so, but it is beginning to be recognized in most unexpected quarters as a strong ally of religion, and that, too, both among those of scholarly temper and those least acquainted with Christianity intellectually. Many devoted preachers of the gospel not only discover in their scientific study illustrations of theological truth, but in the conviction which such study imparts to them that neither truth nor life have anything to fear but everything to gain from the most thorough investigation and the most resolute thinking, find warrant and courage for such thinking and for courageous doing. The historical study of the Bible especially,

which is the product of the scientific spirit working in the field of biblical literature and history, long viewed as a foe to pure religion, has become for many a man a powerful incentive and a most efficient aid to preaching. And on the frontier of Christianity more than one man who has gone to non-Christian lands to preach the gospel has without loss of zeal or religious fervor been led to abandon jungle preaching to become a teacher of science. Very recently, a representative of the China Inland Mission, that most intensely evangelistic of all modern mission movements, has discovered that his most effective implement for religious work is a biological and electrical laboratory.

By many this situation is still viewed with alarm. Yet in fact nothing is more calculated to give us hope and courage. For, in the first place, the assimilation of the scientific spirit in the realm of theology and religion unifies the spiritual life. A house divided against itself is ever in danger of collapse. To think scientifically in one chamber of the mind, and then to abandon this way of thinking, to bow the knee to authority the moment one crosses the threshold into another chamber, is to make one's mental life an internal contradiction, and one's mental progress hesitating and ineffective. It is only when, with full confidence that what is true is good, the thinker faces the facts in every realm with equal openness of mind and equally cordial welcome to truth new or old, that he really comes to the stature of intellectual manhood and marshals all his spiritual forces on the same side of the battle.

In the second place it unifies the intellectual forces of the community. Nothing can be more undesirable than the arraying against one another of the religious interest and the scientific spirit, a mutual antagonism of the men who stand for religion and those who represent science; and nothing is more unnecessary and foolish. But the only remedy for this situation, which in many quarters still prevails, is the thoroughgoing adoption of the scientific spirit. There is indeed a pseudo-scientific attitude, which is unhappily common even among students of science. Not every scientist has the true scientific spirit. It is not at all a question of the realm in which a man works. A chemist may be utterly unscientific in temper, a theologian thoroughly scientific. The essence of the scientific spirit is the willingness

to face one's facts, patiently to discover what they mean, as resolutely to accept the results thus reached, and then to shape one's conduct accordingly. To set limits to the field of investigation or the results to be reached, is just as dogmatic and unscientific when it is the religious phase of life that is ruled out as when one bars out results of geological research or literary study. But the genuine spirit of science inevitably breaks down barriers and draws men together, both because it tends to abolish differences of opinion and because they who possess it find themselves kindred spirits, with nothing to fight over.

In the third place it furnishes religion with a new and powerful weapon, for its own distinctive purposes. This is especially true in two realms, that of the schools and colleges at home, that of aggressive propaganda in non-Christian lands. The scientific spirit is more and more permeating the life of the colleges. No student can escape its influence. It is a matter of congratulation that it is so. But this makes it imperative that religion shall not set itself in antagonism to science; more than this, that it shall itself be permeated with the scientific spirit. Doing this, frankly accepting all that science proves, frankly adopting the scientific attitude in all its apologetic, it makes an appeal to the student mind which dogmatism can never make. And in non-Christian lands, on the other hand, nothing can so enforce the presentation of the message of Christianity as a genuinely scientific spirit. The laboratory experiment will attract attention and undermine superstition. But the handling of spiritual things with a reverence for truth that forbids either prejudiced denunciation of other men's religious convictions or the unsupported dogmatic assertion of one's own favorite type of Christian thought, in other words the spontaneous manifestation of that confidence in truth and regard for it which is the essence of the scientific spirit, will itself command confidence and win faith in one's message as nothing else can do. Such a spirit is not only not inimical to religion; it is an essential element of the religion of Jesus. For though Jesus brought to men not primarily a principle of knowledge but of conduct, told them not only how to find truth, but what was the truth by which life was to be lived, thus doing for the world what science itself could not have done, yet his whole teaching is permeated by that sense for reality

and that recognition of the right of truth to command, whatever the past may have affirmed, which is essentially the spirit of science.

“The law was given by Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ,” and that revelation must ever remain supreme in its sphere, the inspiration of men even while they despair of its full realization in their lives. But in these latter days new light has broken forth not only from the written word of God as the Pilgrim Father expected, but from the rocks and hills, and from the heavens above and from the depths of the earth. From the eager study of our whole world, physical, mental, and moral, there has sprung a spirit which, at first supposed to be a foe of the religion of Jesus, is fast becoming its powerful ally. That it is so gives hope for the future, and makes us dare to look for the day when the church shall no longer be joined in unholy alliance with ignorance, but all the forces that make for intelligence shall be arrayed on the side of the religion of Jesus.